



THE HISTORY AND FUNCTIONS OF PARISH COUNCILS

Parish Councils have their origins, 1000 or more years ago during Saxon and Norman times, in the development of villages, all over England. The Lord of the Manor's writ ruled in villages, because communications were poor and central government often weak, there was little national control. Sometimes all villagers met to make decisions, if they affected the whole community. Gradually, the Parish Priest and sometimes the Schoolmaster joined the Lord of the Manor to become the ruling clique, because in smaller villages they were perhaps the only people who could read and write. It was probably they who became the first effective Parish Councils.

By the Year 1601, Church Vestry Meetings were so organised and workable that it was quite natural for legislators to give them the responsibility of levying the poor rate. These were the first effective local taxes. Everyone in the parish was entitled to attend Church Vestry Meetings but in practice the work fell to a few individuals, rather like Parish Councils today.

Although the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act removed from Parish Vestries the responsibility for poor relief and handed it to Poor Law Unions - these were the origins of our present District Councils. Parishes had in many cases accumulated responsibility for administering local charities and managing common land under the distribution of land as a consequence of the 18th Century Enclosure Acts. In 1894 although the Squire, the Parson and sometimes the Schoolmaster were still the leaders in the village, education was available to more people and many wanted their own say in managing local affairs.

In 1894 Gladstone piloted the Local Government Act through the House of Commons. This met with a lot of opposition, for example, over eight hundred amendments were moved during its passage through the House. Nevertheless, the Act became law and Parish Councils were formed. Under the 1894 Act, Parish Councils were to receive their income from rates levied on agricultural land, but this was a time of agricultural depression and the money raised was small, and soon this system was abandoned. Rates were to be raised from householders, something householders had little experience of before, except for the hearth tax, and this led to more public opposition to Parish Councils. It was not until after the First World War that Central Government began to give serious responsibilities to Parish Councils - the earliest being the provision of allotments and playing fields. Although an Act relating to allotments had been passed in 1908.

After the Second World War, the National Association of Parish Councils was formed, and by 1952 half of all parishes in the country were members. The Association became a national force and raised the profile and consequently the activity of Parish Councils.

ROLE OF PARISH COUNCILS

The 1965 Royal Commission on Local Government (The Redcliffe-Maude Commission) recommended that local councils should be empowered to do what they pleased for the benefit of their residents. The Royal Commission Report resulted in the 1972 Local Government Act, which removed many of the restrictions on the activities of Parish Councils. For example, before the 1972 Act, Parish Councils could not carry over surplus monies from one year to the next in order to fund major projects. This is something most Councils have to do these days to avoid having a massive Council Tax bill for any year in which any

large project is attempted. Subsequent legislation has added to the powers of Parish Council and they can undertake any of the following services:

- . Provision of allotments.
- . Develop and improve knowledge of the arts and crafts.
- . Provision of bars and laundrettes.
- . Provision of Cemeteries, Crematoria, and Mortuaries and maintenance of churchyards.
- . Provision and maintenance of public clocks.
- . Provision of any form of public entertainment and of any premises for giving entertainment; this includes maintaining bands or orchestras and providing for dancing.
- . The provision of buildings for public meetings and functions, indoor-sports, physical recreation, for clubs having recreation, social or athletic objectives.
- . The provision and maintenance of footway lighting, to light roads and pavements.
- . The provision of litterbins and the support of anti-litter campaigns.
- . The provision and maintenance of public open spaces, pleasure grounds and public walks, public lavatories, car parks, cycle parks, public parks and associated facilities.
- . Maintenance of public footpaths and bridleways; planting and maintaining roadside verges.
- . Maintenance of public seats, shelters for general public use and particularly for bus passengers, erection of signs, which warn of dangers, announce a place name or indicate a bus stop.
- . Provision of indoor or outdoor swimming pools or bathing places.
- . Provision of facilities for conferences, the encouragement of recreation and business tourism.
- . Powers to maintain a village or town green.

In addition to all those things for which it has statutory powers, a Parish Council can do anything, provided it is for the general benefit of the community, and that the expenditure in any one year does not exceed £5.00 per local government elector in that particular Parish or community. Indeed, most things that the Parish Council might wish to do, or hope to do, could be covered by other legislation for which expenditure is unlimited. The only limit being imposed is that of the reluctance of parishioners to pay.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

There are serious moves afoot for Parishes to undertake work formerly the responsibility of the larger Councils. This will involve Parishes in greater financial responsibility but residents should benefit through having a much higher quality of service.